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SUBJECT: THE ROK'S NEW MINISTER OF UNIFICATION: LEE JONG-SEOK MOVES TO CENTER STAGE

REF: SEOUL 14

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Incoming Minister of Unification (and Chairman of the National Security Council Standing Committee) Lee Jong-seok is a left-leaning nationalist who supports the ROK playing a more active and independent role in the world, particularly on issues involving North Korea. The Embassy has worked closely with Lee during the past two years in his position as Deputy Secretary General of the National Security Council, and we have found that he recognizes that the relationship with the United States is critical to the ROK's security and international influence. Park Sun-won, one of Lee's closest aides at the NSC, reiterated, to POL M/C on January 5 that Lee remained firmly committed to maintaining the strength of the bilateral alliance with the United States; Park added that "time was running" out for the Roh Administration to make progress on the DPRK nuclear issue and that Lee would seek to improve coordination with the United States on the issue. According to Park, Lee intends to undertake an active campaign of public appearances to garner increased support for the Roh Administration's foreign policy. COMMENT: Lee's promotion does not signal any policy change, as he was already the most influential foreign policy official in the Roh Administration. Lee is unaccustomed to the limelight and, at 48, is twelve or more years younger than ministers such as Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung, whom he will be supervising on the NSC; it would not be surprising if these factors cause Lee to hit a few bumps in the road in his early months in his new position. END COMMENT AND SUMMARY.

FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN TO A STARRING ROLE

¶2. (C) South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun on January 2 nominated National Security Council Deputy Executive Secretary Lee Jong-seok to be the next Minister of

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Unification; Lee will also assume former Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young's position as Chairman of the National Security Council Standing Committee. With this announcement, Lee moves from his position behind the scenes as director of ROK foreign policy into a center stage, starring role. The National Assembly will hold hearings on

Lee's nomination, but does not have the right to block the appointment.

13. (C) Lee has long been President Roh Moo-hyun's most important foreign policy adviser, more influential than either Chung or Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, and certainly more powerful than his nominal boss, outgoing National Security Advisor Kwon Chin-ho. Although powerful, Lee has stayed strictly behind the scenes until now; he is almost never quoted in the media and we do not believe he had made a single speech since entering government (although he has occasionally appeared before the National Assembly). According to our Blue House contacts, Roh and Lee share the same world view, especially on North Korea. Also sharing similar temperament, Roh has found Lee to be totally devoted to presidential goals and objectives.

A LEFT-LEANING NATIONALIST . . .

14. (C) Lee Jong-seok is a left-leaning nationalist. He is committed to seeing South Korea play a more active, independent role in the world and is sensitive to perceived slights to his nation. He can easily become emotional, for example, on the subject of Japan and its attitudes toward Korea. Prior to entering government, Lee was a little-known academic whose work focused exclusively on North Korea and reunification. He is passionately devoted to the Roh Administration's "Peace and Prosperity Policy" of promoting the slow, long-term reunification of the Korean Peninsula through an extensive economic assistance program to the DPRK. He is regarded by many as wary of American influence and power and did not meet with an American official for the first six months he was in office. In extensive interactions over the past two years on a wide array of issues, however, we have found Lee to be a pragmatic interlocutor who fully

understands that the American alliance is key to his country's foreign policy. He frequently describes South Korea as an outstanding example of the "American model" for national development.

. . . WHO VALUES THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE

15. (C) During a January 5 meeting with POL M/C, Park Sun-won, Senior Director for Strategy Planning at the NSC and one of Lee's closest advisors, stressed that Lee wanted to work closely with the United States. Park said Lee had specifically asked him to emphasize to the Embassy that Lee was pro-American and wanted to promote the mutual national interests of the ROK and United States. During the past two years, the United States and ROK had resolved or largely resolved a number of difficult bilateral issues, including the relocation of USFK, strategic flexibility, and the relocation of our Embassy. Park stressed that many of the difficulties in these negotiations had been the result of ROK budget issues, rather than a lack of commitment to the alliance on the part of the Roh Administration. Now that these were behind us, the bilateral relationship was poised to enter a new era of good feelings. Park added that Lee recognized that "the United States is the only partner of the ROK that goes on forever" and that the relationship with Washington was a critical hedge against the rise of China.

LEE TO CAMPAIGN FOR ROH ADMINISTRATION FOREIGN POLICY

16. (C) As Minister of Unification, said Park, Lee Jong-seok intended to take a much more public role than he had in the past, and would be making speeches, publishing op-ed pieces and appearing on television news shows. In his role as Chairman of the NSC Standing Committee, Lee would energetically promote the Roh Administration's entire foreign policy, not merely its policy of engagement with the DPRK.

NORTH KOREA POLICY

¶7. (C) The number one foreign policy objective of the Roh Administration, said Park, was to make progress on the DPRK nuclear issue, and Lee would be looking for ways to enhance policy coordination with the United States on North Korean matters. Speaking with unusual candor, Park pointed out that the Roh Administration was entering its fourth year and that time was running out. It was important that the United States and the ROK have "real policy coordination from A to Z," including on denuclearization and the transformation of North Korea. For example, said Park, the ROK accepted that the United States had the right to take measures against North Korean counterfeiting of American currency, but wanted those measures to be coordinated with the Six Party Talks.

¶8. (C) Park said that another of Lee's priorities would be the development of inter-Korean relations, in particular the next round of ministerial talks in late March. Park claimed that Lee would be a much tougher interlocutor for the North Koreans than Chung Dong-young had been. Whereas Chung had been searching for results that would bolster his upcoming campaign for President, Lee would be working toward the specific goals of denuclearization of North Korea and peace on the Peninsula. Lee had no broader ambitions, was intensely loyal to President Roh, and would focus solely on advancing Roh's foreign policy agenda. More broadly, Lee would not repeat Chung's "mistakes," especially Chung's need to see his own name in every newspaper.

BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

¶9. (U) Lee Jong-seok has been Deputy Secretary General of the ROK National Security Council since March, 2003. Prior to that, he had been a Senior Researcher at the prestigious Sejong Institute from 1994. Lee also served as a member of the Ministry of Unification Policy Advisory Committee from 1996-2002 and as a member of Presidential Advisory Committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Relations and Security from 2001-2003. He obtained his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D from Sungkyunkwan University in 1984, 1989 and 1993, respectively. He was born on May 11, 1958 in Namyangju, Gyeonggi Province.

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